

# Employee wellness

How to develop programs that will benefit employees and your business

Interviewed by Roger Vozar

**H**ealthy employees are happier and more productive employees, says Lisa Speaks, director of Human Resources at ASG Renaissance. A wellness program instituted three years ago has helped ASG Renaissance control health care costs, but the biggest benefits have been in increased productivity and employee retention.

"We hope we can see a decrease in insurance rates if our employees are healthier. But the other two pieces are more critical in terms of having an immediate impact on our bottom line," Speaks says.

A 2012 report from the U.S. Department of Health showed wellness programs reduced health care costs by 20 percent to 55 percent, cut short-time sick leave by 6 percent to 32 percent and increased productivity by 2 percent to 52 percent.

"Employees spend a good portion of their waking hours at work, so the work environment can have a powerful influence on behavior," Speaks says.

*Smart Business* spoke with Speaks about employee wellness programs and their benefits.

## What are examples of employee wellness programs?

A wellness plan can be anything from a small health seminar held on-site for your employees to a yearlong initiative focusing on different health topics each month. For example, you might want to offer blood pressure screenings at the work site in February in recognition of Heart Health Month. The most important point is to make it convenient for your employees, so they can get the information and health screening they need without missing a lot of time away from work.

Another way to positively affect employee health is to schedule a day for a massage to visit the workplace. Stress can have a huge effect on your health, and relieving that stress may help your employees avoid catching a cold or flu that's circulating in your area.

One popular program in our office has been healthy cooking classes, where we've brought in an outside professional to educate our employees about healthy eating and talk to them about what they eat and how it affects their body.

Once you have taken your first step in offering a wellness program, it's important to continue to develop the program each year by adding new components. You always have to be looking for a new approach.



**Lisa Speaks**  
Director of Human Resources  
ASG Renaissance

## How do you determine what to offer?

Start by conducting an analysis of where your employees might have issues related to illness and disease. For example, asthma, weight management and diabetes are common areas of concern. There are many resources available through advocacy organizations focused on these health issues that can help you provide information to your employees explaining the risks and what they can do to alleviate the situation.

You also can work with a benefit broker, which works with firms that create wellness programs. For some programs, you might work directly with a wellness company.

ASG Renaissance has been recognized as one of the 101 Best and Brightest Companies and is invited to symposiums where managers hear what other companies are doing. Likewise, you can collect information from other firms that are interested in engaging employees and keeping them happy.

## Are employees offered a participation incentive?

There are several insurance programs centered on wellness that offer incentives for participation. We offer the Healthy Blue Living Program. As part of enrollment in Healthy Blue Living, employees are encouraged to visit their primary care physician in the first 90 days of the plan year for a thor-

ough health evaluation. Following the evaluation, their physician will develop a plan to help them improve their health. Because of their participation, employees are eligible for lower copays than if they do not participate. This doesn't mean that employees have to meet their goals to be eligible for the plan incentive, they just need to take steps to improve their health.

## How does encouraging employees to stay home when they are sick reduce absenteeism?

For a number of reasons, it's better to stay home when you are sick than come into work and risk getting everyone else sick, too. You're not as productive when you're sick, and co-workers are not as productive because they are concerned that they might get sick, too. If loss of work time is an issue for your employees, telecommuting — the ability to work from home — may be a benefit to add to your wellness program.

## How do you measure results?

Key measurements are absenteeism and work force productivity, which could be measured in performance reviews, retention rates and the overall wellness of employee population as measured by your insurance carriers.

ASG Renaissance has not seen direct savings yet in terms of health care costs. However, the rates haven't increased as much as they were previously, and employees are getting better benefits out of their health care insurance for the same cost. The goal is to encourage prevention to avoid bigger issues down the line.

## What steps should a company take to develop a program?

The key is to get feedback from your employees. There is no benefit gained by spending thousands of dollars on a workout facility that no one will use. The other thing is to take small steps. If you jump in and implement a full-blown wellness program from day one, it can be intimidating to employees. Develop a three-year plan and introduce one new initiative per quarter in year one, every other month in two year and then by year three have a different wellness initiative once a month. Have a strategy behind what you're trying to accomplish. <<

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